



September 10, 2021

Union County Public Schools
Board of Education
400 N. Church Street
Monroe, NC 28112

Dear Union County Board of Education:

At your meeting on Tuesday, September 7, 2021, you requested additional written guidance from Union County Public Health, and from me specifically, to assist you in your role of managing the school safety, education, and operational environment in light of the particular education issues created by the pandemic. I hope this latest guidance will serve to clarify and reinforce the prior guidance I have provided each week to Union County Public Schools.

For the past 18 months, my staff and I have met with Union County Public Schools staff at least once per week (sometimes daily) to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic and strategies for mitigating exposure and transmission in the school setting. I have continued to provide my recommendations and guidance to UCPS staff during these meetings and at any other time staff has requested my opinion. I am informed that the UCPS staff has conveyed those recommendations to you on a regular basis.

As the Union County Public Health Director, I continue to hold the view that a 14-day quarantine period is the best, safest option to control the spread of COVID-19 in schools based on all the data available to us. This guidance has been and remains heavily influenced by the absence of a mandatory masking policy to help keep children and staff safe at school, a factor that currently applies to fewer than 5% of North Carolina students.

We know that the virus can be spread from an infected person before symptoms develop, and that some infected persons never develop symptoms. Quarantine (which, by legal definition, involves those impactfully exposed and potentially capable of being infected with COVID-19) is one tool we have to reduce the risk that infected persons might unknowingly transmit infection to others, and it also ensures that persons who become symptomatic, or are otherwise diagnosed during quarantine, can be rapidly brought to care and evaluated. In the absence of other non-pharmaceutical protective measures, such as universal masking, then quarantine becomes the primary tool to protect children in school. Without a universal mask requirement in Union County Public Schools, a 14-day quarantine

Public Health
2330 Concord Ave,
Monroe, NC 28112
T 704.283.3400

unioncountync.gov

period remains the best option to provide for the protection of students, teachers, staff, and members of the community with whom students live and closely interact.

I also recognize, however, that a 14-day quarantine period can impose personal burdens that may affect the physical and mental health of persons quarantined, and that implementing quarantines can also pose additional burdens on public health systems and communities, especially during periods such as we are currently experiencing, when new infections are rising and resulting in an increasing number of persons who need to quarantine as close contacts. I am sympathetic with these concerns and they play an important role in my guidance to you.

The primary sources of public health guidance you have been provided as the leaders of UCPS is the StrongSchoolsNC: Public Health Toolkit (K-12) (the “Toolkit”), which is largely founded on guidance for schools issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (the “CDC”). The Toolkit has been issued by the State of North Carolina and adopted by the North Carolina State Board of Education. While this guidance is to you and, therefore, yours to interpret and apply, I wish to state unequivocally, as the Public Health Director that it is sound guidance on the pressing issues of student safety and education that UCPS is tasked with handling.

That guidance, as we have discussed on multiple occasions, allows for a modified quarantine period of 10 days if the quarantined individual remains asymptomatic, or 7 days if the individual remains asymptomatic and receives a negative antigen or PCR/molecular test on a test taken no earlier than day 5 of quarantine. In either case, a person who is exiting quarantine before day 14 should continue to monitor symptoms and strictly adhere to all non-pharmaceutical interventions (e.g., wear a mask, practice physical distancing) through 14 days after the date of last exposure. One important reason I have continued to recommend a 14-day quarantine period for UCPS students and staff is because the Board of Education has chosen not to require universal masking in schools.

After reviewing the most current data available and speaking to public health officials at the state level, I have determined that because the risks of a person developing COVID-19 illness after day 10 of quarantine drop significantly, the risk of a person returning to the classroom after a shorter quarantine period are comparable to the risks of that person working or attending school in a mask-optional setting. As a result, if you select a different quarantine period from the options available to you, I do not object, so long as you follow the quarantine guidance listed in the Toolkit.

I also wish to clarify some recent misstatements and misunderstandings on the issue of quarantine requirements. While legally empowered to do so, to date there have been no formal orders or rules issued by me or my office to UCPS that have required you to adopt specific communicable disease control measures. To be clear: no child or staff member in the UCPS system has received a formal isolation or quarantine order from me or my office during the current academic year. It has been expected, however, by the State and local health authorities that isolation and quarantine guidance be followed. The decisions to exclude ill or impactfully exposed students from school have ultimately been made solely by UCPS, based on the Toolkit guidance, with my agreement and support.

As you are aware, it is the duty of the Board of Education “to provide students with the opportunity to receive a sound basic education” (G.S. 115C-47) and to exercise “general control and supervision of all matters pertaining to public schools in their respective administrative units” (G.S. 115C-36). Such general control related to public schools includes the decision regarding how to comply with the communicable disease control measures you have been given, taking into consideration the guidance and recommendations of local public health officials, myself included, as well as the guidance published at the state and federal levels, which has also been provided to you.

The Toolkit, which provides North Carolina boards of education with a comprehensive summary of “layered prevention strategies based on current COVID-19 trends and updated CDC guidance,” sets out a large variety of measures which school boards “should” implement. Strategies that “should” be implemented are those “that, if not implemented, create conditions of high risk for COVID-19 exposure and spread.” Some of the actions that the Toolkit states schools “should” take include:

- Requiring teachers and staff to report vaccination status and requiring unvaccinated teachers to participate in screening/testing programs;
- Requiring all children and staff in K-12 schools to wear face coverings consistently when indoors;
- Requiring all passengers and staff to wear face coverings on buses, vans, and other group school transportation;
- Maintaining a minimum of three (3) feet of distance between K-12 students who are not vaccinated within school settings to the greatest extent possible without excluding students from full-time, in-person learning; and
- Following the recommendations of their local public health department and continuing to consult with local public health officials for input on community transmission and vaccine uptake to make local decisions.

My staff and I have found the guidance and recommendations of the Toolkit to be sound public health guidance for schools. I have consistently recommended adopting all or nearly all of the prevention strategies listed in the Toolkit. While the Board of Education has elected to follow some of the guidelines in the Toolkit, the Board is not utilizing all of the strategies which could be selected to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and help keep children and staff safe in the school environment.

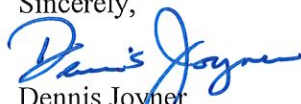
The Toolkit recognizes that boards of education and school leaders are best positioned to determine which of the prevention strategies will provide students and staff with the most amount of protection, given the COVID-19 situation within each community. This means that it is up to you as a board to make decisions regarding COVID-19 mitigation strategies that will work best within UCPS to keep students and staff safe, after examining all of the data and guidance available to you, including my recommendations based on my legal responsibility to make balanced recommendations and decisions founded on multiple and emerging sets of data pertaining to public health.



I will continue to meet with and provide updated data, information, and recommendations to UCPS, including any updated guidance from state public health officials and the CDC, and the UCPS staff can then continue to provide you with recommendations consistent with North Carolina law on which to base your decisions. I remain available as a resource to the community and to UCPS specifically to answer questions or provide guidance on your decisions that impact student health and public health.

Thank you for your continued commitment to the students of Union County.

Sincerely,


Dennis Joyner
Public Health Director

cc: Union County Board of Commissioners
Mark Watson, County Manager
Michelle Lancaster, Deputy County Manager